



Stephanie Rawlings-Blake
Mayor

PLANNING COMMISSION

Wilbur E. "Bill" Cunningham, Chairman

STAFF REPORT



Thomas J. Stosur
Director

December 19, 2013

REQUEST: Mount Vernon Master Plan

RECOMMENDATION: Adoption

STAFF: Alexandra Hoffman

PETITIONERS: Department of Planning

OWNER: Multiple Property Owners

SITE/ GENERAL AREA

Site Conditions: The boundaries of the Mount Vernon Master Plan study area are Cathedral Street/Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard/Howard Street to the west, Guilford Avenue to the east, Mount Royal Avenue to the north, and Franklin Street/Calvert Street/Centre Street the south. The Mount Vernon neighborhood is located north of the Central Business District, south of Baltimore's Penn Station, east of Seton Hill and west of the Jones Falls Expressway.

General Area: Mount Vernon is one of Baltimore's most prominent historic neighborhoods and features the iconic Washington Monument. The study area has a wide variety of development types, including a mix of historic structures and new construction, residential and light commercial uses, and apartment buildings and rowhouse dwellings. Most of the study area is included in the Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation's Mount Vernon Local Historic District, which protects contributing structures and provides design review for exterior modifications and new construction within the district. Mount Vernon is home to many important cultural and religious institutions, community development organizations and neighborhood associations.

HISTORY

Pursuant to the Homeless Shelter Agreement between the City and the Mount Vernon-Belvedere Association included in the Board of Estimates March 19, 2009 approval of the homeless shelter at 620 Fallsway, the Department of Planning agreed to complete a planning process for the Mount Vernon neighborhood. Specifically, the Agreement required:

- During the two years following the effective date of the Agreement, the City's Department of Planning will work with MVBA to complete a land use plan or an Area Master Plan, if that is deemed more appropriate by the Department, that will inform the

Citywide comprehensive Zoning Code Rewrite, an updated transportation plan, and study development options for selected surface parking lots in the community.

- The Planning Department will include in the next City-wide rezoning a land use plan in line with the Mount Vernon Area's existing design guidelines.
- During the two years following the effective date of the Agreement, the Department of Planning will work with MVBA to develop architectural sketches for redevelopment of surface parking lots.

CONFORMITY TO PLANS

Baltimore City Comprehensive Master Plan

The request conforms to the goals and objectives of the Baltimore City Comprehensive Master Plan, specifically:

Live

- Create and preserve mixed-income neighborhoods in Competitive, Emerging and Stable neighborhoods with targeted disposition of City properties
(Goal 1, Objective 1, Strategy 6)
- Streamline and strengthen the development process
(Goal 2, Objective 2)
- Promote Transit Oriented Development (TOD) and mixed-use development to reinforce neighborhood centers and main streets
(Goal 2, Objective 3)
- Protect and enhance the preservation of Baltimore's historic buildings and neighborhoods
(Goal 2, Objective 4)

Earn

- Enhance transportation options to provide workers with commuting options and mitigate traffic congestions
(Goal 3, Objective 1)

Play

- Establish Baltimore city as the region's center of culture and entertainment
(Goal 1, Objective 5)
- Promote unique retail venues as shopping and tourist destinations
(Goal 2, Objective 2)
- Maintain a well-managed system of parks and open spaces
Goal 3, Objective 1)

Learn

- Attract and retain college students and recent graduates
(Goal 2, Objective 1)

Planning efforts have also been undertaken in the adjacent Charles North, Greenmount West and Seton Hill communities (the Charles North Vision Plan, the Greenmount West Master Plan and the Seton Hill Master Plan) that add to the context of the study area.

ANALYSIS

Process

As discussed under Plan Scope, the Mount Vernon-Belvedere Association requested that certain planning items be completed by the Department of Planning during the approval process of the homeless shelter at 620 Fallsway in 2009. The public planning process began in earnest on October 4th, 2011 with a general kick-off meeting at which the plan scope was augmented through the Strengths, Weaknesses, and Opportunities exercise. The plan scope was further refined at a subsequent general meeting on January 17th, 2012.

During the planning process, the Planning Department provided background information regarding existing housing data, Census data, and regulatory controls and conducted a Strengths, Weaknesses, and Opportunities exercise in order to define the community's priorities for the Master Plan. As a result of the Strengths, Weaknesses, and Opportunities exercise, in addition to the items specified explicitly in the Agreement, the plan scope was expanded to address:

- Parks and open space issues, excluding the ongoing work by the Mount Vernon Place Conservancy, which is being addressed under a separate process,
- Comprehensive review of development regulations, and
- Various transportation planning items referenced in the Agreement.

Once the plan scope was defined and confirmed with the broader group, topic committees were formed to develop the vision and recommendations surrounding three key areas:

1. Development Committee
Chairs: Alexandra Hoffman, Department of Planning
Eric Holcomb, Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation Staff
2. Open Space Committee
Chairs: Kate Brower, Department of Recreation and Parks
Anthony Cataldo, Department of Planning
3. Transportation & Parking Committee
Chairs: Theo Ngongang, Department of Transportation
Vincent Thomas, Parking Authority of Baltimore City

All committees were open to participation from all stakeholders. Each committee was co-chaired by City Agency representatives and had a dedicated representative of the Mount Vernon-Belvedere Association to ensure that the recommendations were properly vetted as they were being developed. A Steering Committee was also formed to help coordinate the recommendations across committees and included all committee chairs as well as representatives from the Mount Vernon-Belvedere Association, and other active institutional participants such as the Midtown Development Corporation, the Peabody and the University of Baltimore.

The community also independently developed a "Community Vision Statement," which is included in the plan. Maps illustrating initial concepts for recommendations on development, open space, land use and zoning were presented at another community-wide meeting for additional feedback. Based on the input received at these broader community meetings, a draft plan was presented to the Mount Vernon-Belvedere Association, from which there was additional discussion of the recommendations pertaining to development, open space and transportation. The final plan has been vetted by the Mount Vernon-Belvedere Association.

The Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation unanimously approved this plan on December 10th, 2013.

Recommendations

This plan seeks to enhance the experiences of residents, property-owners, institutions, businesses, employees and visitors of Mount Vernon in this diverse, historic, mixed-use neighborhood.

Development

Since much of the neighborhood is protected through a local historic district, wholesale redevelopment is not anticipated for the Mount Vernon neighborhood. Therefore, the development recommendations focus on clarifying and streamlining the three layers of development regulations that currently apply to renovations to existing structures and redevelopment of vacant lots or buildings that do not contribute to the local historic district:

1. Mount Vernon Urban Renewal Plan (2006)
2. Mount Vernon Local Historic District
 - a. Baltimore City Historic Preservation Procedures and Guidelines (2009)
 - b. Baltimore City's Mount Vernon Historic District Design Guidelines for New Construction (2005)
3. Baltimore City Zoning Code (1971)

It is recommended that the design content in the current Urban Renewal Plan be consolidated into the local historic district's Mount Vernon-specific Guidelines for New Construction to prevent conflicts between regulatory layers and to streamline the review and approval process. Although the general areas of regulation to be relocated have been identified in this plan, the amendment to the Guidelines for New Construction will be subject to the review and approval of the Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation through a separate public process. The Urban Renewal Plan will be retained to include the height limits negotiated in 2006 as well as off-street parking requirements for the conversion of rowhouse structures.

The proposed mapping of the new Zoning Code better reflects the existing built environment, with the height limits cross-referenced and a higher residential density for new construction incorporated to ensure that there is sufficient density to construct an all-residential building up to the height limit. New primary-use surface parking lots are proposed to be prohibited within the height limit overlay in order to encourage the preservation and redevelopment of the urban fabric.

In order to ensure regulatory protections are not lost during the implementation of the proposed changes, the amendments to the Guidelines for New Construction must be approved by the Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation before any amendments to the Urban Renewal Plan, as outlined in the plan.

Open Space

Since Mount Vernon is generally a fully-developed neighborhood with historically significant structures, there is limited opportunity to achieve new, large-scale open space within the study area. However, the plan explores opportunities to enhance existing open spaces including the proposed permanent improvements for the Howards Park dog park at Centre and Howard Streets. The plan does not address the Mount Vernon Place squares because recommendations for that park are being developed through the ongoing Mount Vernon Place Conservancy process.

The open space section also acknowledges the importance of the street in the open space network and many of the open space recommendations correspond to those in the Transportation & Parking section, including recommendations for enhancements to the streetscape.

Transportation & Parking

The issues of transportation and parking were seen as key to enhancing the experiences of residents, property-owners, institutions, businesses, employees and visitors of Mount Vernon. Balancing the often competing interests of area stakeholders, the recommendations for transportation and parking were hotly debated.

The transportation planning generally seeks to differentiate “residential” and “commercial” streets – routing vehicular and bus traffic to Charles and Cathedral Streets, Guilford Avenue and I-83. The plan identifies opportunities for transportation improvements that should be studied further, including the conversion of one-way streets such as Saint Paul and Calvert to a two-way traffic pattern to calm traffic, discourage cut-through traffic and encourage the use of I-83 to access downtown.

The plan proposed a number of improvements to infrastructure to support the bike- and walkability of the neighborhood, with further study through a “complete streets” study.

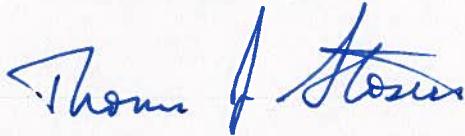
A study of both on- and off-street parking was completed by consultants Sabra, Wang & Associates, Inc. and showed that although there is sufficient parking supply to meet existing and projected demand, there are significant barriers to matching this supply and demand. The recommendations for parking take a multi-pronged approach: augment parking supply where possible, reduce barriers to existing parking resources and reduce demand through the promotion of alternative modes of transportation and car- and ride-share programs. The range of parking recommendations requires an ongoing collaboration between the Mount Vernon-Belvedere Association and the Parking Authority of Baltimore City; therefore, it is recommended that a Transportation Management Association be formed to steward the implementation of these recommendations.

NOTIFICATIONS

Staff mailed notifications to the Charles Street Development Corporation, the Downtown Partnership of Baltimore, the Midtown Benefits District, the Midtown Development Corporation, the Mount Vernon-Belvedere Association, the Mount Vernon Cultural District, City Council President Bernard C. "Jack" Young, the 11th District Councilman William Cole and the 12th District City Councilman Carl Stokes. The Steering Committee and all other active participants in the planning process by email.

Other City Agencies impacted by this planning process were provided a comment period before the Plan was finalized, including the Departments of Housing and Community Development, Transportation, Recreation and Parks and the Parking Authority of Baltimore City. The Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation unanimously approved this plan on December 10th, 2013.

In addition, the draft Mount Vernon Master Plan is available on the Department of Planning website, along with the date and time of the Planning Commission's public hearing for consideration of the plan.



**Thomas J. Stosur,
Director**